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Shame, Pride and Klaus Barbie

How rare it is for a proud and powerful nation to admit shabby behavior. That's just what the United States has done in the Klaus Barbie case. Shameful as the episode was, the admission of blame the United States made Tuesday, first to itself and then to France, goes far to redeem national honor.

The shame is that American military intelligence officers shielded Klaus Barbie, the World War II Gestapo chief in Lyons, from French justice. No thanks to this country, Mr. Barbie has been expelled from Bolivia and awaits trial in France. The salvaged honor comes from a comprehensive Justice Department report that serves history and invites us to learn from it.

Learn what? That there's a difference between doing business with repugnant informants, even Nazis, and the far dirtier business of protecting accused war criminals.

Allan Ryan Jr., who headed the Justice Department investigation, concludes that it was "defensible" for Army intelligence to recruit Mr. Barbie in Germany at the dawn of the cold war. That was a time of postwar confusion in Europe over who was friend and who was foe — a time when former foes had information to provide. More important, it did not become clear until later that Klaus Barbie was not just another Nazi but the alleged "Butcher of Lyons," accused of torturing Resistance fighters and sending thousands of Jews to their deaths.

What was not defensible, Mr. Ryan says, drawing a clear moral and legal line, was the lie and cover-up. When France asked the United States to deliver Mr. Barbie for trial, military intelligence officers hid him and told civilian authorities in occupied Germany that they didn't know where he was. Then they spirited him out of Germany to Bolivia. That was not merely wrong, it was a crime — obstruction of justice. Not until last year, 32 years later, did the French catch up with him.

The need to traffic with stool pigeons and undercover agents does not justify affirmatively protecting someone accused of "crimes against humanity." Even allowing for genuine fear that turning Mr. Barbie over to the French might compromise American counterintelligence, Mr. Ryan adheres to his legal line. He assumes that civilian authorities would have drawn the same one had the counterintelligence people told them the truth.

Whoever decides such questions, Mr. Ryan argues eloquently that expediency is not their only guidepost. "It is not naïve to believe," he insists, "that we have seen the end of the attitude that anything is permissible, including the obstruction of justice, if it falls under the cloak of intelligence."

Justice's remarkable report gives due recognition to the temper and mood of Europe 35 years ago. But it refuses to condone the Army's conduct or deny national responsibility. The good news is that national standards have advanced since that time, the report notes. Individuals now are more likely to be held personally accountable for acts that disgrace the country. As for history, the Justice Department report summons the courage needed to say that the United States is sorry.